

Silence of the Tachiarai Airfield: Selective Memory and Collective Amnesia

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Abstract

Memory politics is a powerful tool in international relations for states to dismiss their responsibilities for violating international norms and highlight their victimhood and a newly constructed image without justified consequences. Instead of undergoing an intensive process of reconciliation and reparation like its World War II ally Germany, Japan's approach to remembering its imperialist past contrasts in its narratives, education, and means. The Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum, a small cultural institution located on the former grounds of the Tachiarai Imperial Airbase in Kyushu, Japan, serves as a case study of how local museums construct narratives about the war using historical sites and evidence. Using analysis of theoretical frameworks set forth by Pierre Nora, Tony Bennett, Adam Lerner, and other scholars whose case studies concerns various types of memorial sites across cultures and states, this essay qualitatively breaks down the institutional, social, and mnemonic effects of the site, and seek to explain its power dynamics with local and national communities. This paper argues that the Memorial Museum fosters collective amnesia by selectively emphasizing Japan's victimhood while omitting its imperialist actions during World War II. This approach complicates Japan's ability to reconcile with its past, shapes contemporary identity and international relations, and reinforces a narrative of victimhood nationalism.

Keywords: memory politics, Japan, nationalism, memorial

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Introduction

The majority of Japan's top imperial government officials, including wartime Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, were labeled as war criminals during the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in 1946 and were punished through imprisonment and executions (MacArthur, 1946). However, the fundamental structures of imperial Japan were not dismantled as thoroughly as those of Nazi Germany. As part of General MacArthur's effort to rebuild Japan into a pacifist ally under U.S. occupation, the imperial family, led by Emperor Hirohito, was retained as the head of state. Wartime cultural and social structures and norms were also left largely intact (Moore & Robinson, 2002, 81). This allowed the world's oldest monarchy to persist and enabled the survival of right-wing symbols and nationalist ideals in contemporary Japan. While the significance of the royal family today remains a topic of debate among historians, the way memory is curated and shared by institutions and museums undeniably impacts both Japanese domestic and international politics.

This essay focuses on the former Tachiarai Imperial Airfield, now the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum. Built in 1919, the airfield played a significant role during the Second Sino-Japanese War, serving as a base for Mitsubishi-built jet fighters and bombers that indiscriminately raided cities in mainland China and Korea. Toward the end of World War II, the airfield was used to train kamikaze pilots, mostly teenagers, for suicide missions in the Pacific War (Bernstein, 1999). Yet, its role in the deaths of thousands of civilians in China and Korea, as well as the forced recruitment of young Japanese teenagers for suicide missions, has largely been overshadowed. Instead, narratives focus on the airfield's strategic destruction by American bombings near the war's end, which resulted in the deaths of civilians, including a group of school children.

By analyzing its institutional and social mnemonic effects, this paper argues that the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum fosters collective amnesia by selectively emphasizing Japan's victimhood while omitting its imperialist actions during World War II, reinforcing a narrative of victimhood nationalism.

Literature Review

Research and analysis on the politics of memory have always been comparatively parochial in the field of social sciences. While a growing literature on mnemonic politics focusing on social dynamics, political power structures, and historical process of conciliation are beginning to bring memory analysis from mere thought experiments in philosophy to contemporary applications, few have used the same interdisciplinary lens to re-evaluate the heavily contested mnemonic landscape of East Asia.

Growing out from a Euro-centric philosophical background, the theoretical foundations of memory often bridge from critics of history as the means to remember the distant past. Nietzsche's concept of memory, which derives from the socio-political background of the late 19th century Europe, believes that the overtly objective and scientific approach to history is counterproductive in that it fails to account for the balance needed for the monumental (inspiring models), the antiquarian (revering roots), and the critical (interrogating and breaking with the past) to advance culturally and politically (Nietzsche, 1997). Gadamer argues that total detachment from the past is undesirable, given that our relationship with the past engages in a "fusion of horizons", in which memories become irreplaceable conditions for us to understand the present and the future (Gadamer, 2013). The biggest issue of these hypotheses on memory

is that the distinction between individual and collective memory is weak. While individual stories can be powerful, it does not offer enough analytical evidence to explain the need for communities to commemorate a shared past in shared spaces, despite differences in their individual memories.

Stepping out from the pre-assumption that remembrance is a psychologically individual act, Halbwachs believes that it is a social collective framework. History, in this case, is determined by the political and social forces which influence the collective society on what to let go and what to retain (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992). Building on top of this, Olick believes a continuous “mnemonic practice” drives states to instrumentally construct narratives, legitimize power, and form identities. While Olick used post-WWII Germany as an exemplary case, it is difficult to apply such directly to Japan, given its different socio-political conditions and historical trajectories, despite their similarities.

Theoretical development in analyzing sites of memories also contributes to the tool boxes for scholars in the 21st century to conduct case studies across cultures and polities. Williams suggests that the global phenomenon of constructing sites of memories serves dual purposes for both state instrumentalization for legitimacy and identity building, and educational assets to prevent future atrocities (Williams, 2007). While this framework is applicable to many post-war memorial sites, it is difficult to suggest these sites in Japan strictly follow these two purposes. Although narratively, all post-war sites in Japan are constructed for peace, lack of reconciliation mechanisms and historical educational awareness limits their functions. Sodaro, on the other hand, critically examines memorial museums as politicized narrative spaces with lack of neutrality: even the moral educational narratives serve to construct and justify specific state ideologies and policies (Sodaro, 2018). Lerner further develops the instrumentalization of memorial politics into means of victimhood nationalism to justify state ideologies and relations on the international stage (Lerner, 2022). While this may be true for the cases of well-known memorial sites, like the 9/11 Memorial, the Vietnam War Monument, the Kigali Genocide Memorial, and the Berlin Wall, lesser-known local sites may reveal a different dynamic in which are instrumentalized at a different extent by states at the national and international level.

Karl Gustafsson has shown that memory politics in East Asia can play a diplomatic role through representations of collective memory and history in museums and memorials (Gustafsson, 2014). Yet, these interactions also suggest that places of memory that have an international audience are also much more likely to be influenced by states' national interests and foreign diplomatic pressure. Located in the middle of rural Kyushu, Tachiarai neither has the international fame, nor access to enough infrastructural access for it to serve an international audience, compared to sites such as the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders in China, and the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo (Takenaka, 2015). This makes Tachiarai a specifically local site of remembrance worthy of analysis. As a part of the collective effort to bring forth the effects of memory politics in socio-political dynamics, this paper contributes to the field by bringing the perspective of localized memorial sites, and understanding the broader implications of national narratives in which smaller communities may play a lesser, but nevertheless existing role.

Methodology

A qualitative case study on the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum as a singular local site of memory in rural Kyushu, Japan, will be conducted through contextualized examination of its institution constructs, content displays, and disseminates historical narratives at the local level.

Primary sources include on-site exhibits, museum displays, and artifacts such as kamikaze pilot suicide notes, survivor testimony compiled in the museum's second chapter, the museum's self-presentation materials, and the aircraft on display. These materials are analyzed for the narratives they construct as well as those they omit.

Interdisciplinarily, I seek to bring theoretical frameworks from memory studies, nationalism theory, and museology: Pierre Nora's distinction between *Lieux de Mémoire* and *Milieux de Mémoire* provides the foundational lens for examining how the museum reconstructs rather than preserves historical memory. Lerner's theory of victimhood nationalism informs the analysis of how Japan's wartime identity is selectively framed through trauma and grievance.

Bennett's concept of the exhibitionary complex, drawing on Foucault and Gramsci, is used to situate the museum within broader state-society power dynamics. Additional frameworks by Poole (memory and responsibility), Connerton (typologies of collective amnesia), Dembinska (intercommunity trust-building), and Foote and Azaryahu (commemorative selectivity) are applied to examine the institutional and social mechanisms through which historical amnesia is produced and sustained. Taken together, these frameworks enable a multi-layered critique of how the Tachiarai Museum functions simultaneously as a cultural institution, a community spectacle, and a site of political memory-making. First, this paper will examine the museum as a site of collective amnesia, focusing on the limitations that the site has on seeking historical objectivity and evoking conciliation, communication, and reflection as a process of peace building. Secondly, the position in which the site lies in the bigger framework of Japanese societal and political memorization of its imperialist past will be discussed in relation to the power dynamics between state, societies, and the site, as well as victimhood nationalism.

The Site of Collective Memory and Amnesia

Amnesia itself can replace a collective memory. Unlike other cases of memory politics, Japanese war narratives are characterized by scholarly debates framed within complex theoretical frameworks. Hein argues that the internal division within Japan between revisionists and nationalists “prevents the formation of a collective memory” (Hein, 2020, p. 47). Similarly, Han concludes that “contemporary Japan's public memory-making and -remaking processes are shaped by contestants to reclaim places” (Han, 2012, p. 510). The Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum contributes to this discourse by narrating a memory that selectively excludes crucial historical details and contexts. As a result, amnesia became the dominant impression of World War II among younger Japanese generations.

Pierre Nora suggests that collective memory is constructed through selective remembrance and forgetting, a process most visibly demonstrated in museums and memorials (Nora, 1989, p. 7). Drawing on Aristotle's notion of memory, Nora argues that present historical memories exist as reconstructed entities, distinct from the actual historical events they purport to represent. Accordingly, *Lieux de Mémoire* (sites of memory) are no more than reconstructed accounts of the now-absent *Milieux de Mémoire* (real environments of memory). Through its emphasis on civilian suffering and the heroism of kamikaze pilots, the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum curates a narrative that downplays Japan's role as a perpetrator in World War II. This selective amnesia mirrors broader national tendencies to avoid accountability for wartime atrocities, shaping a skewed historical understanding among younger generations.

Tachiarai is situated on the physical space which accommodates *milieux de memoire*, but its contemporary artifacts and narratives are *lieux de memoire* in nature. Nora differentiates

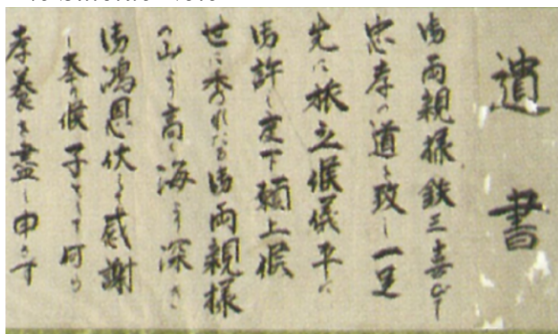
memory from history in that memory “only accommodates those facts that suit it”, while history, “because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism” (Nora, 1989, p. 9). In this case, the lack of intellectual and secular production is brought by the limitation of sources of references to *milieux de memoire*, allowing the space to be more accommodating to memory than history.

The Selection and Narrative of Memories

At the Tachiarai Museum, the curated memories rely heavily on accounts from local survivors and suicide notes from kamikaze pilots, creating a collective memory centered on victimhood. For instance, the suicide note (Figure 1) conveys an emotional message from a kamikaze pilot, expressing gratitude to his parents and acknowledging his perceived duty to serve his country.

Figure 1

The Suicide Note



Source: <http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/>

However, absent from this narrative is the historical and political context of Japanese imperialism and the airfield's role as a base for inflicting harm upon other civilians. These elements of history can only be preserved and understood by engaging with the lost *Milieux de Mémoire*. The museum's second chapter, “Tachiarai Airfield and the Lives of the People” (Figure 2), includes accounts from survivors of the American bombing near the war's end. This chapter develops a *Lieux de Mémoire* rooted in a disproportionate focus on victim narratives over perpetrator narratives. As a result, the memory constructed within the museum perpetuates a one-sided understanding of history.

Figure 2

Pamphlet on the Lives of the People

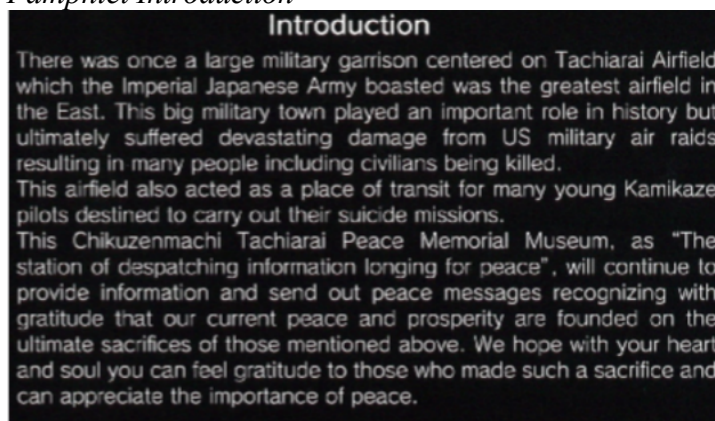


Source: <http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/>

Although the absence of official frameworks for reconciliation may limit smaller and local memorial sites' ability to present a balanced historical narrative, the museum itself bears the responsibility of revealing the moral contexts and legacies associated with its site. Poole argues that memory is not merely about preserving the past but is also deeply tied to responsibilities (Poole, 2008, p. 150). The amnesia surrounding Japanese imperialism risks eroding the duties to reconcile and educate, fostering a phenomenon of historical detachment among younger Japanese populations. While aggressor narratives do exist within certain demographics, individuals who hold these perspectives often align with the prevailing victimhood narrative to gain social acceptance in Japan (Yu, 2020, 5). The Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum attempts to reframe its responsibility by presenting itself as “the station of dispatching information longing for peace” (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Pamphlet Introduction



Source: <http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/>

However, revisionist historical narratives that contribute to collective amnesia in contemporary Japan persist within the museum's exhibits. This selective framing of history carries significant domestic and international political implications.

Victimhood Nationalism

The portrayal of specific artifacts that evoke an orchestrated sense of sentimentalities aligns with Lerner's theory of victimhood nationalism, which identifies two key qualities: (1) it is constructed on perceived or real collective trauma, and (2) it projects grievances onto otherwise uninvolved international actors (Lerner, 2020, p. 63). In the case of the Tachiarai Museum, the collective memory shaped by amnesia replaces explicit grievances with a vague perception of peace. However, this absence of direct acknowledgment or projection of grievances risks leaving historical conflicts unresolved, particularly with other states such as Korea and China. By emphasizing Japan's victimhood without addressing its responsibilities, the museum perpetuates unresolved historical tensions and complicates Japan's international relations.

This selective framing also poses a domestic threat by fueling the resurgence of right-wing nationalism in Japan, where historical amnesia transforms into a form of impunity (Soyinka-Airewele, 1999). The museum's narrative thus not only undermines reconciliation with other nations but also fosters an internal environment conducive to revisionist and nationalist ideologies. Although “peace” is the central theme of this *Lieux de Mémoire*, the exhibition subtly portrays a fading collective memory of nationalism, justified through perceptions of pride and self-defense. The museum's highlights are two aircraft: a restored Type 97 Fighter

from a Kamikaze mission (Figure 4) and the only remaining Naval Type 0 Carrier Fighter in the world (Figure 5).

These aircraft are displayed with a strong focus on Japan's industrial and technological advancements at the time, while the political and social conditions surrounding the Kamikaze pilots are only briefly mentioned in a few official posters and notices. The museum's narrative often echoes the honorable tone of wartime propaganda, further perpetuating a sense of pride and sacrifice.

Figure 4

Type 97 Fighter



Source: <http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/>

Figure 5

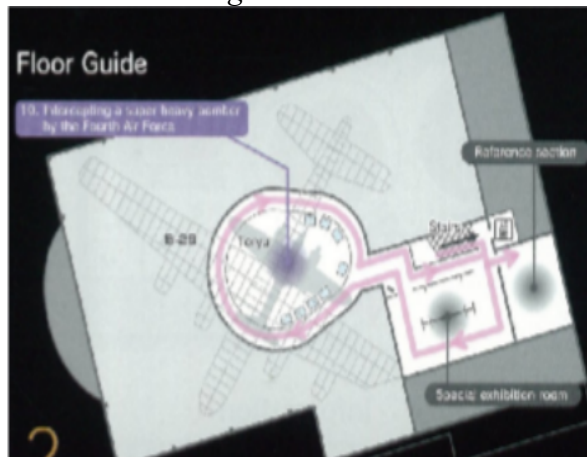
Type 0 Carrier Fighter



Source: <http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/>

The victimhood narrative centers on the American bombing of the site, symbolized by a B-29 bomber wreckage hanging from the ceiling (Figure 6). A reconstructed video recounts the downing of the B-29 by a Toryu interceptor, narrated by survivors describing the bombing's horrors.

Figure 6
The B-29 Wreckage



Source: <http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/>

While this comforts local families, it risks promoting victimhood nationalism, aligning with Soyinka-Airewele's warning that selective memory can justify impunity. In the context of post-war Japan, this parallels the reconstruction efforts that selectively pardoned war criminals of the past through the creation of vague collective memories or historical amnesia. By omitting the broader context of Japan's imperialist actions and focusing on narratives of victimhood, the museum reinforces a skewed understanding of history, complicating efforts to achieve reconciliation and accountability.

Institutional Power and the Politics of Commemoration

With that being said, how does this local site contribute to the mnemonic landscape of the surrounding community, and as a part of the memory identity of the state? The museum offers discounts and group tours for local students, but its internal structure serves less as a place that encourages reconciliation and discussion. Rather, its focus remains on the physicality of displays. This limitation in memorial characteristics, as argues Nicole Fox, can “affect the extent to which certain narratives of victimhood are remembered or forgotten” (Fox, 2019). The lack of interactivity further prevents conciliation with the past, and lack of definition of peace provides a form of indoctrination rather than communication and reconciliation through a very patriotic masculinity perspective that contrasts with feminine sentimentality and victimization.

Building on Schöpf (2000) and Smith's (1999) conception on myths and symbols, Dembinska argues that historical reconsideration requires a form of “appeasement of conflicting memories through processes that transform myths” (Dembinska, 2010, 316). Using the case of Eastern Europe, Dembinska's intercommunity trust-building framework stresses an equally important role that both states (official discourses, recognitions, and initiatives) and civil societies (reimagined collective memories, debates, integrative symbols) can play. Yet, when applied to the monoethnic communities in rural Kyushu, the lack of contestation between collective memories, along with a strong governmental narrative and identity as a post-war pacifist state created the anomaly of a victimization of pacifist national identity. In other words, the pacifist movements in the post-war late 20th century have influenced the narrative purpose of these sites of memory to maintain and promote peace. The content of the collective memory that is reminiscent of ideals and narratives from a time of imperial militarism remains.

The effects of such are layered. From the analytical level of social governance and power dynamics between the state and the individual, Bennett argues that the exhibitionary complex reveals an intertwined power dynamic in which memory sites play between societies and governments. Drawing from the perspectives of Foucault and Gramsci, Bennett describes three key developments in which 19th century European societies have re-oriented their own identities and relationship with the state through the paradox of both functioning as spectacles and under surveillance: 1. Societies see themselves as spectacles; 2. State involvement in the provision of such spectacles; 3. The permanent display of power/knowledge (Bennett, 1996, 20). This explains one purpose that the memorial museum serves for the surrounding rural communities, where engaging with a particular site for collective remembrance of the communities' past is one way in which the society "spectacularize" themselves. If such is true, then it would naturally fit into the greater power dynamic with the state. Evidently, the Tachiarai Memorial Museum had its roots in being a physical site to present replicas of World War II era Japanese aircraft, first of which was the Nakajima Ki-27 recovered from Hakata Bay. These artifacts, along with the most recent purchase of the replica model of Shinden fighter in 2022, were all initiated by the town government of Chikuzen (Watanabe, 2022). Foote and Azaryahu define historical amnesia as selectivity of elements for commemoration, but specifically in ways that official commemoration of certain memories overrides those that were not commemorated (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). The involvement of the local government not only conspicuously builds commemoration of narratives, but also shapes what kind of spectacle the community sees itself as.

Paul Connerton further categorizes collective amnesia into ones that are resulted from states and governments, individuals and family groups, civil societies, or other forces of capitalist development (Connerton, 2008). Yet, while post-war governments and the revisionist elements within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party arguably engage in repressive erasure on crimes committed during the imperial era and prescriptive forgetting for revitalizing some sense of national pride for post-war reconstruction, the results of such have shifted into constitutive forgetting in the formation of new identity, as well as structural amnesia. While the former two types of forgetting are government incentivized, the latter two are social phenomena reflected on individuals. Pushback against amnesia does exist during the post-war era, and yet, most of the society was engaged in the amnesia of humiliated silence, in which veterans refuse to revisit memories that were deemed too traumatic. Many characters from Kazuo Hara's documentary reveal just this dynamic (*The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*, 1987).

Conclusion

The Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum exemplifies how selective memory, framed through narratives of victimhood and national pride, perpetuates historical amnesia, hindering reconciliation and posing ongoing challenges to both Japan's domestic identity and its international relations. Domestically, Japanese right-wing sentiments are fueled by the lack of reconciliation, with memories of war crimes replaced by a victimhood mentality. This can hinder Japan's pacifist promises and approach, with many younger hard-line politicians promoting more confrontational policies. Given the limited scale and scope of the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum, more comparative investigation should be conducted with other memorial museums on other war-time events, such as the atomic bomb memorials in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to prove the existence of collective amnesia. The lack of war reconciliation from modern Japan not only hinders the stability of the region but also fuels Chinese and Korean nationalism based on anti-Japanese sentiments that are passed down from wartime generations. Scholars such as Mangan and Kim investigate East-Asian relations and

further reveal a causal relationship between Chinese and Korean nationalism and the lack of Japanese war crime reconciliation (Mangan et al., 2013). Further research on memorial efforts of Japanese war memories should be conducted beyond national boundaries, and use the concept of collective amnesia as a basis to examine victimhood nationalism.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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